

Influence of School Climate, Sense of Alienation, and Perceived Religious Discrimination on Muslim Students' Academic Engagement in Catholic Schools

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Abstract—Poor academic engagement remains a relevant concern in diverse educational settings. This study examines the contribution of School Climate, Sense of Alienation, and Perceived Religious Discrimination as determinants of Academic Engagement among 105 Senior High School Muslim students. Diagnostic research design, purposive sampling, survey technique, and multiple regression analysis were applied. The findings revealed that, collectively, the school climate and sense of alienation significantly influence academic engagement; however, perceived religious discrimination had a significant negative impact on the criterion. Collectively, these variables account for 20.3% of the variance in academic engagement. Therefore, Ecological Systems Theory is affirmed. Likewise, the results support the need to improve inclusive educational practices aligned with SDG 4: Quality Education and encourage further research to examine additional influencing variables.

Index Terms—School climate, sense of alienation, perceived religious discrimination, Muslim students, academic engagement, catholic schools.

1. Introduction

This section presents the problem and its setting, the significance of the study, the statement of the problem, the hypotheses, and the theoretical and conceptual framework.

A. The Problem and its Scope

Low academic engagement among Muslim students has become a growing concern in the global educational setting. Academic engagement, including students' participation, attention, and commitment to learning activities, was an important indicator of educational success and school persistence. However, the Muslims continued to exhibit disengagement in different learning environments, especially those dominated by different minorities. Disengagement was a challenge among Muslims in secondary and higher education settings, where Muslim students were less engaged in educational activities (Chagas & Muñoz-Garcia, 2023). Similarly, a study of Islamic education determined that the extent of students' academic involvement is an important issue, and constant observation is necessary (Imron et al., 2023).

Ongoing low Muslim student involvement in academic activities demonstrated that the issue of Muslim student involvement in academics has yet to be fully overcome.

Previous studies have also identified low academic involvement among Muslim youth in other countries. According to research carried out on Muslim learners in Indonesia within Islamic educational institutions, there have been issues relating to inadequate academic engagement of the Muslim learners (Yudiani et al., 2023). Despite this, scholars in education found that Saudi students consistently have difficulty participating in religion classes and have now campaigned for greater student participation in class activities (Aseery, 2023). Even so, in Spain, research among university students also identified problems with engagement and learning satisfaction regarding religion and spirituality that affect their education, including among Muslims across diverse educational environments (Chagas & Muñoz-Garcia, 2023). The above example indicates that the problem of low academic engagement amongst Muslims transcends a single country's borders.

Another issue that pertained to the Philippine situation was the lack of Muslim students' involvement in academic tasks. The problems associated with their low levels of involvement have persisted, especially for those who study in diverse environments and non-Muslim schools. According to recent studies in the Philippines on student engagement, many students tend to show less engagement in their schoolwork (Fuertes et al., 2023). Furthermore, according to Briones et al. (2023), student engagement is very important in the Philippines. Considering the growing population of Muslim students enrolled in different educational institutions across the country, the issue of low academic engagement deserves greater scholarly attention in order to better understand the experiences of Muslim learners in Philippine schools.

There are many potential consequences of lower engagement in the academic process among Muslim students. For instance, such students can show lower academic engagement, less involvement in school-related processes, a lack of persistence

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in their studies, and ultimately poorer academic performance (Fuertes et al., 2023). Similarly, in the view of Chagas & Muñoz-Garcia (2023), low levels of engagement could be associated with lower learning satisfaction and lower educational outcomes. In addition, disengagement in the school environment can result in low attendance and other academic issues. All of these factors point toward the need to look critically at the issues of Muslim students' low school involvement and see them as part of a problem for education that can impact students and schools themselves.

B. Significance of the Study

This study is aligned with SDG 4 (Quality Education). It aligns with the HCDC vision and mission, as schools can help students reach their full potential by fostering safety and strong relationships. The results of this study can be useful to Social Studies teachers, as they can promote intercultural and religious diversity among students. Moreover, the result of the current study can be useful to other researchers who wish to examine the relationship between school environment, religiosity, and academic engagement. In this way, school administrators and leaders are encouraged to reconsider their strategies and ensure that schools remain open and inclusive to the needs of all students.

C. Statement of the Problem

This study determined the influence of school climate, sense of alienation, and perceived religious discrimination on the academic engagement of Muslim students studying in Catholic schools. Specifically, it answered the following objectives:

1. To determine the levels of School Climate in terms of student-teacher relationships, opportunities for student engagement, school physical environment, and perceived exclusion/ privilege, Sense of Alienation in terms of social exclusion, social rejection, and lack of self-awareness, Religious Discrimination in terms of perceived prejudice, closeted symptoms, and negative labels, and Academic Engagement among the respondents.
2. To determine the correlation of school climate, sense of alienation, and religious discrimination, and the academic engagement among respondents.
3. To determine the extent to which school climate, sense of alienation, and religious discrimination influence academic engagement among the respondents.

D. Hypotheses

The null hypotheses were tested at a 0.5 level of significance.
 H01 – School climate, sense of alienation, and religious discrimination do not have a significant relationship with the academic engagement of Muslim students.

H02 –School climate, sense of alienation, and religious discrimination do not significantly influence the academic engagement of Muslim students.

E. Theoretical Framework

Ecological Systems Theory by Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasizes that an individual's development is shaped by a

range of environmental systems, from the immediate environment to large-scale societal organizations. School climate is the microsystem that directly impacts students' academic engagement. The microsystem included immediate environments such as the family and school, where individuals constantly engaged with others who influenced their behavior and development through a learning process (Crawford,2020). The mesosystem, which encompasses interactions within family, school, peer groups, religion, and other social activities, emphasizes the interconnectedness of various environments in relation to human development (Perron, 2017). Poor relationships and connections among these students cause alienation due to a lack of a sense of belonging to school and other social environments. Ecological systems theory will be useful for identifying potential barriers and factors that lead to the formation of either inclusionary or exclusionary attitudes in religious schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

F. Conceptual Framework

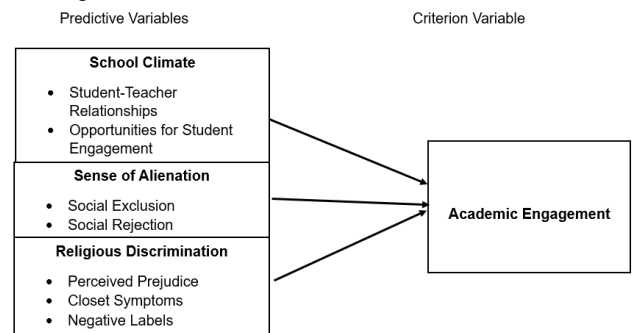


Fig. 1.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. It illustrates the relationship between the independent variables, School Climate, Sense of Alienation, and Religious Discrimination, and the dependent variable, Academic Engagement, among senior high school Muslim students.

2. Methodology

This section discusses the different research and data collection techniques that the researcher used. The chapter included the research design, the study locale, the sample and sampling method, the data collection technique, and the data analysis technique.

A. Research Design

The research design used in this study is a diagnostic one. As defined by Whitfield et al. (2023), it is a research design employed to determine and investigate the nature of a particular problem by studying the variables, their patterns and relations, and the factors involved, in order to gain more insight into the condition in question. It is the appropriate method for this study as it will allow for a comprehensive investigation into how school climate, alienated sense, experienced religious discrimination, and school engagement relate for Muslim students in Catholic schools. This study aims to investigate the effects of independent variables on student engagement and, thereby, to understand better how students are involved in the

class environment in a diversified learning context.

B. Locale of the Study

The researcher conducted this study in private Catholic schools located in the 1st District of Cotabato Province, particularly in the Municipalities of Midsayap, Libungan, Pigcawayan, and Pikit. The research focuses on senior high school Muslim students as the respondents of this study. The researcher selected these Catholic schools because they have Muslim students enrolled, making them suitable for the study.

C. Sample and Sampling Technique

Respondents were 105 Senior High School Muslim students in Catholic schools within the 1st district of Cotabato province. The method used in this research was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a data gathering strategy in which the researcher uses their discretion to select participants for the study. As such, the identification of the appropriate units (e.g., people, organizations, documents, departments, and so on) for sampling in accordance with the research questions and the study's scope (Bryman, 2015). Purposive sampling is used 'to deliberately choose those who are most likely to provide relevant and helpful information' (Kelly et al., 2010), and it is a technique to 'identify and choose cases that are best suited for a limited range of resources' (Palinkas et al., 2015).

D. Data Gathering Technique

In this study, the researcher employed a survey to collect data. Taherdoost (2021) defined a survey as a research method for collecting information from a group of respondents via structured questionnaires to understand their opinions, experiences, or behaviors. Additionally, surveys administered via structured questionnaires provided an efficient means of collecting standardized information while systematically capturing students' perspectives (Creswell, 2018).

Four adapted questionnaire instruments were used in data collection. A 5-point Likert scale was used. The first questionnaire instrument was school climate, adapted from Zullig et al. (2021) and consisting of 20 items. The instrument was reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.8925. The second questionnaire, which is sense of alienation, was adapted from Hagerty and Patusky (1995) and consisted of 11 items. The instrument's reliability was also good, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.870. The third questionnaire, on perceived religious discrimination, was adapted from Allen et al. (2018) and consisted of 11 items. Cronbach's Alpha was used to indicate the questionnaire's reliability (0.900). Finally,

the Academic Engagement questionnaire was developed from Appleton et al. (2006) and comprised 10 items. The questionnaire had high reliability, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.921. The researcher chose these instruments for their prior validation and appropriateness for measuring school climate, alienation, and religious discrimination regarding the academic involvement of Senior High School Muslim students.

E. Data Analysis Technique

This study used descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression.

Descriptive statistics is a statistical approach used to summarize, organize, and describe the main features of a dataset. It helps summarize large datasets, making it easier for researchers to understand the data's key characteristics (Alabi & Bukola, 2023). In this study, the researcher used the mean and standard deviation as statistical tools.

To interpret the level of variables, the researcher used the following scale.

Additionally, correlation analysis is used as a statistical method in measuring the strength and direction of the relationship between two or more variables and assessing the relationship between two variables, showing the variations in one variable correspond to variations in another variable (Wisniewski & Brannan, 2024); thus, the researcher used the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation statistical tool.

For the interpretation scale of r-value, the following scheme, as proposed by Guilford (1956), was used:

Computed r	Descriptive Interpretation
±1.00	Perfect correlation
±0.75 to ±0.99	High correlation
±0.51 to ±0.74	Moderately high correlation
±0.31 to ±0.50	Moderately low correlation
±0.01 to ±0.30	Low correlation
0.00	No correlation

Lastly, multiple linear regression analysis is a statistical tool used to explore the relationship of a single criterion and two or more predictor variables, allowing researchers to predict outcomes based on several predictors used to test the combined influence of school climate, sense of alienation, and perceived religious discrimination, allowing the analysis of multiple independent variables on a single dependent variable (Bevans, 2023).

Further, unstandardized and standardized Beta (β) coefficients were used to determine the strength and direction

Scale	Level	School Climate	Sense of Alienation	Religious Discrimination	Academic Engagement
4.20 - 5.00	Very High	Very Good	Very Strong	Very Strong	Excellent
3.40 - 4.19	High	Good	Slightly Strong	Slightly Strong	Outstanding
2.60 - 3.39	Moderate	Fair	Strong	Strong	Very Satisfactory
1.80 - 2.59	Low	Poor	Poor	Poor	Satisfactory
1.00 - 1.79	Very Low	Very Poor	Very Poor	Very Poor	Low

Standard Deviation Value of Ranges and Interpretation

SD Value Range	Level of Variability	Interpretation
0.00 – 0.50	Very Low	Variability/responses are very consistent.
0.51 – 1.00	Low	Variability/responses are relatively consistent.
1.01 – 1.50	Moderate	Variability/responses vary significantly.
1.51 – 2.00	High	Variability/responses vary significantly.
Above 2.00	Very High	Variability/responses are highly dispersed.

of each predictor (Hair et al., 2023). In terms of Scale of Beta (β) Coefficient Strength, the following scheme, as proposed by Cohen (1988) and Hair et al. (2019), was used:

β Value Range	Strength of Influence
$\pm 0.00 - \pm 0.09$	Very Weak
$\pm 0.10 - \pm 0.29$	Weak
$\pm 0.30 - \pm 0.49$	Moderate
$\pm 0.50 - \pm 0.69$	Strong
± 0.70 and above	Very Strong

F. Ethical Consideration

The researcher strictly adheres to ethical standards in conducting the study. Before data collection, the researcher secured informed consent from all respondents and assured them of voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. The study used the collected data solely for academic purposes, and informed respondents of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The study was cleared by the concerned school authorities prior to data gathering. The study was conducted in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, thereby ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, and proper regard for private information. Likewise, the study has also been checked and approved by the Society of Moral Integrity and Legal Ethics (SMILE).

3. Results

This section outlines the study's findings through the analysis and interpretation of the collected data. Specifically presented were descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and the summary of findings.

A. Descriptive Result

Table 1 presents the descriptive table. It contains the predictive and criterion variables involved in the study. It also includes standard deviations, computed means, and the corresponding descriptive interpretations.

Table 1
Descriptive analysis results

Variables	SD	Mean	Interpretation
School Climate	0.39	3.81	High
<i>Student-Teacher Relationship</i>	0.46	4.22	Very High
<i>Opportunities for Student Engagement</i>	0.49	4.34	Very High
<i>School Physical Environment</i>	0.55	4.34	Very High
<i>Perceived Exclusion/Privilege</i>	1.02	2.32	Low
Sense of Alienation	0.71	2.34	Low
<i>Social Exclusion</i>	0.82	2.35	Low
<i>Social Rejection</i>	0.78	2.34	Low
<i>Lack of Self-awareness</i>	0.90	2.33	Low
Religious Discrimination	0.63	2.10	Low
<i>Perceived Prejudice</i>	0.61	1.96	Low
<i>Closet Symptoms</i>	0.69	1.92	Low
<i>Negative Labels</i>	1.01	2.41	Low
Student Academic Engagement	0.46	4.17	High

1.00-1.79 Very Low, 1.79-2.59 Low, 2.60-3.39 Moderate, 3.40-4.19 High, 4.20-5.00 Very High

In particular, the table shows that the school climate variable had an average value of 3.81, which is considered high. The majority of respondents consider the school climate to be positive. At the same time, three of its indicators are highly valued by respondents, whereas one is rated low. The larger SD of physical environments implies greater variability in evaluating them compared with other indicators, although they remain highly valued.

The sense of alienation, the second variable, was rated at 2.34, indicating low alienation. The respondents rated all the variables low. These results show that Muslim students have a generally low sense of alienation in the educational setting, implying that Muslim students rarely feel isolated or alienated during their education and social interactions within Catholic schools. However, since the SD was relatively high, there might be some Muslim students who feel alienated, depending on how well-adjusted they are personally or socially in the educational setting.

Perceived religious discrimination, on the other hand, showed an average of 2.10, which is low. All indicators of this variable are also low. It is important to note the higher SD in the use of negative labels, as this indicates variability among respondents: although most experience none, a few do.

On the contrary, the variable measuring students' academic engagement had a mean of 4.17, which was considered high. The implication is that students actively engage in their academic work. There is little variability among the responses provided.

Overall, despite a positive school environment and low levels of discrimination, respondents show low levels of alienation, though there is some variation in their responses. Nevertheless, there are persistently high rates of student academic involvement.

B. Correlation Result

Table 2 is the correlation table. It presents the predictive and criterion variables. Likewise, the table shows the r-value indicating the strength of the correlation, the p-value describing the level of significance at the 0.05 confidence level, and the corresponding interpretation.

The table shows that the correlation between school climate and student academic engagement variables yielded a p-value of 0.000, which is less than 0.05, indicating a significant association. Hence, the study rejected the null hypothesis. The results show that school climate has a positive but weakly significant relationship with student academic engagement. The results indicate that as students' perceptions of a supportive and engaging school environment improve, their academic engagement tends to increase, though the strength of this relationship is relatively small.

Moreover, the correlation between sense of alienation and the

Table 2
Correlation table

Variables	Student Academic Engagement			Interpretation
	r	p	Decision on Ho	
School Climate	0.230	0.000	Reject	Positive, Weak but Significant Relationship
Sense of Alienation	-0.339	0.000	Reject	Negative, Weak but Significant Relationship
Religious Discrimination	-0.342	0.000	Reject	Negative, Weak but Significant Relationship

Table 3
Regression analysis results

Predictors	Student Academic Engagement			t	p	Decision on Ho	Interpretation
	Estimate	Std. Estimate	SE				
Intercept	3.80		0.44	8.59	0.000		
School Climate	0.27	0.23	0.11	2.54	0.013	Reject	Significant Influence
Sense of Alienation	-0.17	-0.27	0.07	-2.51	0.014	Reject	Significant Influence
Religious Discrimination	-0.13	-0.17	0.08	-1.62	0.109	Fail to reject	No Significant Influence

R= 0.450, R²= 0.203, Adjusted R²=0.179, F=8.57, Sig.=0.000
Level of Significance: 0.05, Decision Rule: Reject H if p<0.05

student academic engagement variables yielded a p-value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 level of confidence. Hence, the study rejected the null hypothesis. The result shows a negative relationship, though it is only weakly significant. The findings imply that higher reported levels of alienation are associated with lower academic engagement.

Lastly, the correlation between perceived religious discrimination and the student academic engagement variables yielded a p-value of 0.00, indicating a level of influence below 0.05. Hence, the study rejected the null hypothesis. The result shows a negative, weak, but significant relationship with academic engagement. It indicates that as experiences or perceptions of religious discrimination increase, students' academic engagement tends to decrease.

The findings show that, among the three factors, school climate has a stronger correlation with academic engagement than alienation or religious discrimination. In other words, the findings identify school climate as a significant factor that can help boost the academic engagement of Muslim students enrolled in Catholic schools.

C. Regression Result

Table 3 presents the regression analysis. It examines the influence of predictive variables and criterion variables on students. Furthermore, the table showed the standardized beta, beta coefficient, t-value, p value, and the corresponding interpretation.

The table shows that the influence of school climate on student academic engagement obtained a standardized Beta coefficient of 0.23. With a corresponding p-value of 0.013, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the study rejected the null hypothesis. It signifies that the influence of school climate on student academic engagement is statistically significant. Consequently, this implies that every unit increase in school climate corresponds to a 0.23 unit increase in student academic engagement.

On the other hand, the influence of the sense of alienation on the student's academic engagement obtained a standardized Beta coefficient of -0.27. It indicates that the student's sense of alienation on the criterion is weak and negative. With a corresponding p-value of 0.014, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the study rejected the null hypothesis. The finding indicates that alienation's influence on student academic engagement is statistically significant. Consequently, this implies that every unit increase in sense of alienation corresponds to a 0.27 unit decrease in student academic engagement.

Furthermore, the effect of religious discrimination on students' academic involvement has been shown to have a

standardized Beta of -0.17. This result means that the effect of religious discrimination is very weak on the criterion in question. Since P = 0.109 > 0.05, the study cannot reject the null hypothesis. It signifies that the influence of religious discrimination on student academic engagement is not statistically significant.

The table also shows the R-squared value of 0.203, indicating a weak to moderate combined influence of school climate, sense of alienation, and perceived religious discrimination on student academic engagement, with a p-value of 0.000, which is below the 0.05 level of significance. Hence, the study rejected the null hypothesis. It indicated that the combined influence of school climate, sense of alienation, and perceived religious discrimination on student academic engagement is statistically significant. The result implies that the set of predictor variables collectively explain 20.3% of the variation in student academic engagement.

The results showed that among the three variables, 'school climate' had the greatest positive effect and was a significant positive determinant of students' academic engagement. The implication is that a student's perception of a conducive learning environment affects their engagement in academics. Another variable, 'sense of alienation', negatively affected students' academic engagement. However, the effect of this variable was comparatively smaller than that of the 'school climate' variable.

D. Summary of Findings

The study specifically found that:

1. School climate is positively and significantly correlated with student academic engagement, whereas sense of alienation and perceived religious discrimination show a negative and significant relationship with it.
2. School climate and sense of alienation significantly influence student academic engagement, whereas perceived religious discrimination does not.

4. Discussions

This section presented the study's results. It specifically includes reviews of previously published studies that are either supported or denied by this study.

A. Correlation Analysis Between School Climate and Academic Engagement

The present study found a significant correlation between school climate and academic engagement. This current finding affirms the study by Phuntsho and Dendup (2020), which found a significant correlation between components of school climate and student engagement. Likewise, the current finding aligns

with Storlie (2020), who found that a positive perceived school climate enhances students' self-beliefs and contributes to their academic engagement, which, in turn, affects their academic achievement.

Aldridge et al. (2018) found that school climate doesn't have the same impact everywhere, it depends on the context and the students themselves. Sometimes, when you factor in other variables, school climate doesn't even predict student outcomes. So, it's clear, its effect isn't consistent across groups or settings.

B. Correlation Analysis Between Sense of Alienation and Academic Engagement

The current study found a significant correlation between sense of alienation and academic engagement. This result affirms the findings of Nevryuev et al. (2022), who examined university students' physiological environment and found that alienation from studying is significantly associated with lower academic engagement and higher emotional burnout. Likewise, this study's findings are corroborated by Chang et al. (2025), who found that alienation is significantly associated with lower life satisfaction and weaker social identity, both of which are strongly linked to reduced academic involvement and engagement among university students.

On the other hand, the finding contradicts the claim of Schnitzler et al. (2020), explaining that engagement is more strongly explained by self-concept and achievement factors than by emotional disconnection variables such as alienation-related experiences. Some disengaged students still maintained academic performance, suggesting that disengagement is not always directly tied to psychological alienation.

C. Correlation Analysis Between Perceived Religious Discrimination and Academic Engagement

The present study found a significant association between perceived religious discrimination and academic engagement. This finding is consistent with Hammad (2024), who found that religion and spirituality are related to positive youth outcomes, including academic functioning, and emphasized the importance of an encouraging environment in fostering effective student development. Likewise, the current finding supports the National Association of School Psychologists' (2020) claim that religious and spiritual factors are strongly related to students' overall development and functioning in school settings.

However, the finding contradicts Benner and Wang (2021), who claim that religious discrimination and other forms of bias among minority students do not consistently show a direct effect on academic engagement. Instead, the effects were indirect, operating through school belonging and emotional adjustment.

D. Academic Engagement as Influence of School Climate, Sense of Alienation, and Perceived Religious Discrimination

The current finding shows that school climate, sense of alienation, and perceived religious discrimination significantly influence academic engagement, although only the first two variables contribute significantly when considered individually. The present finding supports Katsantonis's (2024) argument

that relational school climate has significant predictive power for student and academic engagement, and that students who perceive a more positive environment are more likely to remain engaged over time. Similarly, the present finding supports Li and Lerner (2020), who found that youth who experience school alienation (low belonging, low connection) show significantly lower academic engagement and motivation.

In contrast, the current finding disagrees with Wang and Degol (2020), who claimed that although school climate is generally associated with academic engagement, its predictive power weakens when motivational and psychological factors (e.g., self-regulation, belonging, and identity processes) are included in the model. Also, Fan et al. (2022) showed that experiences of alienation and discrimination do not always significantly predict academic engagement when analyzed together with school-level variables.

E. Conclusion

The study concludes that school climate and sense of alienation are important determinants of academic engagement of Muslim students. Still, perceived religious discrimination is not a significant factor when considered alongside other variables, according to the findings. The overall effect of the predictors is 20.3%. This finding supports the Ecological Systems theory, as both environmental and psychosocial factors contribute to students' engagement. However, the degree of influence and directionality of these factors may vary across contexts.

F. Recommendations

The results imply that future studies can explore other variables not considered in this study, such as student motivation, peer relations, family support, and instructional strategies, to explain the remaining 79.7% of the variance in academic engagement.

The results also demonstrate that academic engagement is significantly impacted by school atmosphere and alienation. By encouraging inclusive teaching strategies that raise student involvement and well-being, these findings help advance SDG 4: Quality Education.

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